



CRAIG HICKMAN 2018-03-28

THE AUTOMATIC SOCIETY: TECHNICS, MEMORY, AND CAPITALISM

MASHINES ACCELERATION, AI, AUTOMATION, CAPITALISM, STIEGLER, TECHNOLOGY

In the past few years both the political Left and Right of the current global machine, the “Establishment” now dictates who will be included or excluded from their dominion. Whatever the hell that is? Ah, yes, it always comes down to this bugaboo... the “System” – a sort of Death Inc., a global matrix of social, military, and economic power that pervades every aspect of our lives to the point its become ubiquitous, invisible and so invasive that we’re trapped not by its outer and more superficial conveyances, those mediatainment systems of political stupidity we term government, or Wall-Street, or War; no, rather it is the more subtle pervasiveness of technics and technology that we’ve become so enamored with, that defines and delimits both our passions and our world that is the dark power over our lives in this age of fracture.

Today’s generation is desperately trying to make some sense out of their lives and out of the world. Most of them are products of the middle class. They have rejected their materialistic backgrounds, the goal of a well-paid job, suburban home, automobile, country club membership, first-class travel, status, security, and everything that meant success to their parents. They have had it. They watched it lead their parents to tranquilizers, alcohol, long-term-endurance marriages, or divorces, high blood pressure, ulcers, frustration, and the disillusionment of “the good life.” They have seen the almost unbelievable idiocy of our political leadership— in the past political leaders, ranging from the mayors to governors to the White House, were regarded with respect and almost reverence; today they are viewed with contempt. This negativism now extends to all institutions, from the police and the courts to “the system” itself.

We are living in a world of mass media which daily exposes society’s innate hypocrisy, its contradictions and the apparent failure of almost every facet of our social and political life. The young have seen their “activist” participatory democracy turn into its antithesis— nihilistic bombing and murder. The political panaceas of the past, such as the revolutions in Russia and China, have become the same old stuff under a different name. The search for freedom does not seem to have any road or destination. The young are inundated with a barrage of information and facts so overwhelming that the world has come to seem an utter bedlam, which has them spinning in a frenzy, looking for what man has always looked for from the beginning of time, a way of life that has some meaning or sense.

A way of life means a certain degree of order where things have some relationship and can be pieced together into a system that at least provides some clues to what life is about. Men have always yearned for and sought direction by setting up religions, inventing political philosophies, creating scientific systems like Newton's, or formulating ideologies of various kinds. This is what is behind the common cliché, "getting it all together"—despite the realization that all values and factors are relative, fluid, and changing, and that it will be possible to "get it all together" only relatively. The elements will shift and move together just like the changing pattern in a turning kaleidoscope.

Ours is the end game that Nietzsche spoke of when he said we were the "sick animal," that our lives were pervaded by the darkest of nihilisms, by a modernity that brought with it certain weaknesses, a hubris – an overreach or even more, an overloaded mind encompassed in *techics* and technology; encompassed by too much information, too many details, too much noise – that ours is a world cut off in time and running down, a world of pure *décadence*. Nietzsche saw himself as the first of many who would follow, as a physician of the *soul* or what remained of its tattered semblance; his diagnoses of the modern age as suffering from the strange condition of self-loathing: modernity as the habitation of the grotesque paradox of living beings who loathe themselves as *living*. We'd become necromantic zombies, the living dead who marched to the music of death and economic servitude, allowed ourselves to be imprisoned by an invisible autarchy of archons who manipulated the world through their minions in a Plutocracy of power and wealth. As Nietzsche would say in *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

"Read from a distant star, the majuscule script of our earthly existence would perhaps lead to the conclusion that the earth was the distinctively *ascetic* planet, a nook of disgruntled, arrogant, and offensive creatures filled with a profound disgust at themselves, at the earth, at all life, who inflict as much pain on themselves as they possibly can out of pleasure in inflicting pain—which is probably their only pleasure."²

During the Renaissance a gnostic-hermetic notion made its rounds among certain thinkers, scientists, alchemists, Magus's: an obscure allusion to the hostility of the created world evoked by the discord at the heart of the world itself, that our earth was none other than that fabled planet of Anareta, a realm of necrophilic destruction and suicide, a planet which destroys life in which 'violent deaths are caused' when the 'malifics' have agents in 'the anaretic place' (*OED* entry, 'anareta').. the implication is clear that our world is itself this 'anaretic place' where the wastelands prevail, the heartless and malevolent landscapes of death and nightmare play out their deadly games generation after generation.

For Nietzsche, the masochistic logic of this asceticism—ordered by what he calls "the ascetic ideal"—is the logic of modernity. Its nihilism epitomizes the various moralities and methodologies that govern its intellectual and ethical life: Platonism, Christianity, Kantianism, scientific method, aesthetics, modern education, et cetera.³ He would see modernity as the child of Idealism, of a system of temporal technics and technologies of the spirit that sought to cut humans off from the flow of time, to channel them into a timeless realm of pure timelessness, a now without outlet, a presentism: each of these ideals is an attempt to isolate a realm of existence untouched by contingency, becoming, or change; and idealism of this sort is, in Nietzsche's view, nihilism—it is an escapist drive toward death:

"We can no longer conceal from ourselves what is expressed by all that willing which has taken its direction from the ascetic ideal: this hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, and more still of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wishing, from longing itself—all this means—let us dare to grasp it—a will to nothingness, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life." (ibid., GMEH)

Denigrating life's constitutive aspects of "appearance, change, becoming, death, wishing," and "longing," the ascetic ideal dismisses them as both inessential and loathsome. The logic of the ascetic ideal is the logic of eternal sleep, of safety and security only in death. In Nietzsche's troubled and troubling view, modern human beings are thus a species of living dead, walking incarnations of the suicidal tendency. Zombies.

Yet, Nietzsche had barely begun his diagnosis, much less offering a cure, when he succumbed to the disease himself, spending the remainder of his own life in silence. Yet, he left breadcrumbs for us to follow.. telling us it would remain for us to complete this project. Nihilism would not be complete for two-hundred years was his prognosis, an uncanny insight into the degradation and corruption of civilization ahead. Marx would see it as *Vampire Capitalism*:

Constant capital, the means of production, only exist, considered from the standpoint of the process of valorization, in order to absorb labour and, with every drop of labour, a proportional quantity of surplus labour. In so far as the means of production fail to do this, their mere existence forms a loss for the capitalist, in a negative sense, for while they lie fallow they represent a useless advance of capital. This loss becomes a positive one as soon as the interruption of employment necessitates an additional outlay when the work begins again. ***The prolongation of the working day beyond the limits of the natural day, into the night, only acts as a palliative. It only slightly quenches the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour. Capitalist production therefore drives, by its inherent nature, towards the appropriation of labour throughout the whole of the 24 hours in the day.*** [my italics] ⁴

Jonathan Crary in his explicates the temporality of this dark presentism this way, saying, a 24/7 environment has the semblance of a social world, but it is actually a non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness. It must be distinguished from what Lukács and others in the early twentieth century identified as the empty, homogenous time of modernity, the metric or calendar time of nations, of finance or industry, from which individual hopes or projects were excluded. What is new is the sweeping abandonment of the pretense that time is coupled to any long-term undertakings, even to fantasies of “progress” or development. An illuminated 24/7 world without shadows is the final capitalist mirage of the individual is always dispensable if the alternative might even indirectly admit the possibility of interludes with no shopping or its promotion. In related ways, 24/7 is inseparable from environmental catastrophe in its declaration of permanent expenditure, of endless wastefulness for its sustenance, in its terminal disruption of the cycles and seasons on which ecological integrity depends.⁵

In our time work is being replaced by automation, and humans are becoming more and more obsolete – and, more, being obsolesced and excluded, expunged from the very system of labour, power, and economics they helped to spawn and enact. As Bernard Stiegler tells it even knowledge workers and scientists, educators and all the knowledge professions from lawyers to rocket scientists, to the most mundane task of loading and unloaded truck, driving them, etc. are in process over the coming century to be replaced by automated systems. As he states it “the application of mathematics to very large databases through the use of algorithms, could replace those theoreticians that scientists always are in principle, regardless of the scientific field or discipline with which they happen to be concerned”⁶

Ultimately we live in a 24/7 Casino – a world fully automated by financial capitalism, the application of this model based on the “financial industry” and its automated computer technologies is intended both to capture without redistribution the capital gains generated by productivity and to conceal, through a computer-assisted financial fraudulence operating on a worldwide scale, the fact that the conservative revolution has broken the “virtuous circle” of the Fordist and Keynesian compromise. (Stiegler, p. 4) As Philip Mirowski reminds us one of the major classes of newly minted intellectual property spawned by this financialization of economics was precisely “business methods,” particularly those which were inscribed within computer programs. Almost immediately, a wave of financial algorithms were newly patented; and this, in turn, rendered financial manipulations conceptually more on a par with technologies that had been previously subject to being reduced to intellectual property. What was posited as a newly valid classification ended up as real in its consequences.⁷

Many thought back in 2007-2008 that the neoliberal order was about to come tumbling down, that it was caput, finished, done. Yet, as Mirowski and others have suggested its not only not going away, its even strong now that it was before; and, at our expense. For we bailed them out, and through austerity and other measures we continue to support their great casino system to our own ruination. Mirowski will explicate the details of this continuing monstrosity. Individual neoliberals reacted to cognitive dissonance precisely in the ways that social psychology has suggested they would. Contrary evidence did not dent their worldview.

Far from withdrawing from the intellectual agonistic field, after brief disarray they redoubled their efforts to influence and capture the economics profession, which has also benefitted economists in weathering the crisis. The preemption of the breaking up of the financial sector in reaction to its insolvency in almost every country has been the single most important event that has bolstered both the transnational orthodox economist profession and the Neoliberal Thought Collective*. Absent the maintenance of the previous leisure class and the further subsidy of the wealthy, the politics of the situation would potentially have been strikingly different. The relationship between the immunity of finance and the imperviousness of change in economic ideas has been direct. (ibid.)

Since economists were caught off-guard during the onset of the crisis, both journalists and the general public had initially to fall back on vernacular understandings of the disaster, as well as cultural conceptions of the economy then prevalent. Hence the prior decades of “everyday neoliberalism” that had taken root in the culture provided a bulwark until the active mobilization of the Neoliberal Thought Collective could mount further responses. (ibid.)

The thought collective has resorted to industrial-scale manufacture of ignorance about the crisis, based upon the time-tested model of the “tobacco strategy.” The excuses generated by economists for defending their profession were a major component of this activity. This in turn deems that the burgeoning resistance to doing anything substantive about global warming should be paired as symmetric with the burgeoning resistance to doing anything about the global economic crisis, with orthodox economists playing a comparable role in each, for purposes of strategic analysis. Agnotology* has proven an effective and cheap short-term strategy to paralyze political action. (ibid.)

The neoliberals have developed a relatively novel way to co-opt protest movements, through a combination of top-down hierarchical takeover plus a bottom-up commercialization and privatization of protest activities and recruitment. This is the extension of the practice of “marketing” to political action itself. Pop fascination with the role of social media in protest movements only strengthens this development. (ibid.)

Finally, the Neoliberal Thought Collective has displayed an identifiable repeating pattern of full-spectrum policy responses to really pervasive crisis, which consists of short-run denialism (see 4, above), medium-term imposition of state-sponsored markets,

and long-term recruitment of entrepreneurs to explore scientific blue-sky projects to transform human relationships to nature. Different components might seemingly appear to emanate from different sectors of the thought collective, and often appear on their face to contradict one another, which helps to inflate characteristically neoliberal responses to fill up the space of public discussion during the crisis, pushing other options to the margins. Furthermore, the different components often operate in tandem (in time, in co-opting opponents) to produce the ultimate result, which is to allow the market to come to its own inscrutable accommodation to the crisis. (ibid.)

We live in a society in which the appearance of politics, or parties, of a Progressive Left or a Conservative Right is mere *papier mâché* – a stage craft in which both parties or the duopoly they've become is part of an inverted totalitarianism. Unlike the classic forms of totalitarianism, which openly boasted of their intentions to force their societies into a preconceived totality, inverted totalitarianism is not expressly conceptualized as an ideology or objectified in public policy. Typically it is furthered by power-holders and citizens who often seem unaware of the deeper consequences of their actions or inactions. There is a certain heedlessness, an inability to take seriously the extent to which a pattern of consequences may take shape without having been preconceived.⁸ An inverted totalitarianism is only in part a state-centered phenomenon. Primarily it represents the political coming of age of corporate power and the *political demobilization* of the citizenry.

As Alinsky once admitted we can't do this alone, we need the vast drift of the workers, both the assemblers and the knowledge workers, we have to begin from where we are. Activists and radicals, on and off our college campuses— people who are committed to change— must make a complete turnabout. With rare exceptions, our activists and radicals are products of and rebels against our middleclass society. All rebels must attack the power states in their society. Our rebels have contemptuously rejected the values and way of life of the middle class. They have stigmatized it as materialistic, decadent, bourgeois, degenerate, imperialistic, war-mongering, brutalized, and corrupt. They are right; but we must begin from where we are if we are to build power for change, and the power and the people are in the big middle-class majority. (Alinsky, 185)

Remember that even if you cannot win over the lower middle-class, at least parts of them must be persuaded to where there is at least communication, then to a series of partial agreements and a willingness to abstain from hard opposition as changes take place. They have their role to play in the essential prelude of reformation, in their acceptance that the ways of the past with its promises for the future no longer work and we must move ahead— where we move to may not be definite or certain, but move we must. People must be "reformed"— so they cannot be deformed into dependency and driven through desperation to dictatorship and the death of freedom. The "silent majority," now, are hurt, bitter, suspicious, feeling rejected and at bay. This sick condition in many ways is as explosive as the current race crisis. Their fears and frustrations at their helplessness are mounting to a point of a political paranoia which can demonize people to turn to the law of survival in the narrowest sense. (Alinsky, pp. 189-190)

Reform is a tricky word... what is being reformed? Obviously it is far too late to reform this civilization and its decadent acceleration into collapse. So what is to be done? Maybe the better path is not reform in Alinsky's sense, that being old school radicalism, but rather its time for a combination of Revolution and Renaissance. If the old Renaissance was cultural bridge between the Middle Ages and modern history, then the new one must be a bridge from modernity to the yet to be decided future – the that which has no name but hope.

We know what the neoliberal order is up too. They seek to eliminate humanity from the equation, to instigate a machinic civilization fully automated and run by Artificial General Intelligence systems. A civilization where the luxurious .01% can exist in their protected enclaves, playing their decadent games of sexual and cultic perversity while what remains of humanity is left to live outside the protected dominions and at the mercy of technics and technology. This is the dystopian version of the future... only one among many.

From the perspective of the worker another world could arise, a world where people would still need to collaborate and form relations, institutions, for education, law, order, etc. but defined based on actual needs and lives rather than on profits and abstract economic probabilities. We've allowed a world based on mathematical equations and computing logics of algorithms and impersonalism to rule over us and conform us to its codes and re-coding's. We are mere programs in an impersonal system of negotiations of give and take, bound to normative algorithms that have ensnared us in a realm of political correctness that excludes the eccentric, the outlaw, the individual. Rather it breeds a world of conformity and collective types, a typology that from birth to death integrates you based on a system of bio-power: biogenetics, optimized intelligence, and symbolic dominion within a realm of Law and Order both artificial and virtual. Subsumed in a technicity of machinic systems from iPhones, iPads, computers, networks, communications, media/entertainment, etc. we are all woven into a set of relations that manipulates our neurosystems to conform to the dictates of economic desire.

Some say we are in the midst of climatological collapse already, the Anthropocene: we cannot continue or last in the nihilistic absurdities of our time where nothing we do makes sense. The scene around us compels us to look away quickly, if we are to cling to any sanity. We are the age of pollution, progressively burying ourselves in our own waste. (Alinsky, 191) Many fear the simple truth that our leaders are helpless, they are in disarray unable to fix things – and, they know it. Hence the anxiety – spurred by the painful experience of being lost and hapless: we are not the only ones, no one is in control, no one is in the know. There is no telling when and from where the next blow will strike, how far its ripples will reach and how lethal the cataclysm will be. Uncertainty and anguish born of uncertainty are globalization's staple products. State powers can do next to nothing to

placate, let alone quash uncertainty. The most they can do is to refocus it on objects within reach; shift it from the objects they can do nothing about to those they can at least make a show of being able to handle and control. Refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants – the waste products of globalization – fit the bill perfectly.⁹

Throughout the last century, our ancestors fought back against the awesome powers of Big Brother, struggling to tear down the walls, barbed wire fences and watch-towers and dreaming of walking the paths of their own choice at the time of their own choice. They seem to have made much of their dream come true and so many of their descendants can manage to keep that Big Brother who watched them at a safe distance from the roads they walk – but only to fall under the watchful eye of Big Brother mark two. At the threshold of a new century the big question to which we, their descendants, will have to find an answer is whether the only choice open to humans is that between Big Brothers mark one and two: whether the inclusion/ exclusion game is the only way in which human life in common may be conducted and the only conceivable form our shared world may take – be given – as a result. (Bauman, 133)

As I watch both the Continent and America, Russia and China, India and other nations from the South China Sea to African mainland to the tip of South America, etc., I wonder if we are entering a new Dark Ages of Man, or if this is just the completion of Nietzsche diagnosis, that we are completing nihilism – erasing the cultural matrix of values that guided Western Civilization for two thousand years. Whether we are to follow the curve into collapse and atrocity, or into a new Renaissance where humans and the planet collaborate in creative ways yet to be foreseen – building, constructing, inventing the possibility of the impossible: a life worth living.

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*Note:

The Neoliberal Thought Collective or as Nick Land my term it, The Cathedral, was structured very differently from the other "invisible colleges" that sought to change people's minds in the latter half of the twentieth century. Unlike most intellectuals in the 1950s, the early protagonists of the MPS did not look to the universities or the academic "professions" or to interest-group mobilizations as the appropriate primary instruments to achieve their goals. Those entities were held too in thrall to the state, from the neoliberal perspective. The early neoliberals felt, at that juncture with some justification, that they were excluded from most high-profile intellectual venues in the West. Hence the MPS was constituted as a closed, private members-only debating society whose participants were hand-picked (originally primarily by Hayek, but later through a closed nomination procedure) and which consciously sought to remain out of the public eye. The purpose was to create a special space where people of like-minded political ideals could gather together to debate the outlines of a future movement diverging from classical liberalism, without having to suffer the indignities of ridicule for their often blue-sky proposals, but also to evade the fifth-column reputation of a society closely aligned with powerful but dubious postwar interests. Even the name of the society was itself chosen to be relatively anodyne, signaling little in the way of substantive content to outsiders. Many members would indeed hold academic posts in a range of academic disciplines, but this was not a precondition of MPS membership. The MPS could thus also be expanded to encompass various powerful capitalists, and not just intellectuals.

As Hayek said in his address to the first meeting of the MPS:

"But what to the politicians are fixed limits of practicability imposed by public opinion must not be similar limits to us. Public opinion on these matters is the work of men like ourselves . . . who have created the political climate in which the politicians of our time must move . . . I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas."

The Russian doll structure of the Neoliberal Thought Collective would tend to amplify and distribute the voice of any one member throughout a series of seemingly different organizations, personas, and broadcast settings, lending it resonance and gravitas, not to mention fronting an echo chamber for ideas right at the time when hearing them was most propitious. Not without admiration, we have to concede that neoliberal intellectuals struggled through to a deeper understanding of the political and organizational

character of modern knowledge and science than did their opponents, and therefore present a worthy contemporary challenge to everyone interested in the archaeology of knowledge. (Mirowski, ibid.)

Agnotology (formerly agnatology) is the study of culturally induced ignorance or doubt, particularly the publication of inaccurate or misleading scientific data. The neologism was coined by Robert N. Proctor, a Stanford University professor specializing in the history of science and technology. Its name derives from the Neoclassical Greek word *ἄγνοσις*, agnōsis, "not knowing" , and -λογία, -logia.

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